

## Senorita Rita

By IZOLA FORRESTER

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"So you are going home, senor?" The girl looked straight ahead at the wide sweep of level prairie pasture, her red lips parted in a smile—a most tantalizing, annoying smile Carruthers thought as he caught a glimpse of it sideways.

"Perhaps," he returned moodily. "I have stayed too long already."

"You do not like Texas, senor?"

"You did not call me senor last week." He bent toward her slightly, but she did not turn her head. "You called me Jack."

She laughed and flashed a hasty glance at him from her soft, dark eyes. "That was a long time ago—last week—but I will call you it again if you wish, Mr. Jack."

Carruthers did not notice the concession or her gay scorn. He stared out to where the cattle browsed—a sea of still, brown waves, hundreds of them, motionless and peaceful in the morning sunrise. Here and there on the outskirts stood a figure of a horse with a silent rider watching the grazing herd. Carruthers' gaze swept over the mass until it rested on one herder at the extreme north. Even with the distance of nearly a mile between them he knew what the figure looked like, knew that it was watching them as he was watching it. It was not a pleasant knowledge.

"You have changed your mind, Senorita Rita," he said bitterly, "since Ramon came to the ranch. I was very happy—in Texas—until your old sweet heart appeared."

Rita laughed again, deliciously, warmly, with a full enjoyment of his mood.

"You are not tired of Texas, Mr. Jack," she said merrily. "You are tired of me—ah, yes, I say you are. You love me so madly, so entrancingly, until somebody else comes who also loves me so madly, so entrancingly, too; and then all at once you are jealous and distant and dissatisfied, and, presto, now, this minute, you say you will leave Texas, you will never, never come to the Fortuna ranch again. You are—what did you call me the day I cried when Pep broke his leg?—kid, that is it. You are a big, foolish kid, Mr. Jack. When a man loves he does not sulk and ride away. He stays and fights. See!" She held up her hand and snapped her small, tanned fingers sharply in the air. "I would not give that for the silly kid lover who rides away. Ramon is a Mexican, but he is brave; he can fight. If I but let him know the least bit I loved him he would carry me off on his horse 'way, 'way south, over there to Mexico. You would not carry me away to your home like that, would you, Mr. Jack?"

"I would carry you to the end of the world," retorted Carruthers.

"But not to your home?" she persisted.

"I have no home," said Carruthers. "When I came here to Texas I meant to stay even before I met you."

"But you are rich, Ramon says you could buy all of the Fortuna for a pastime if you cared for it. And the Fortuna is the richest ranch within a hundred miles of the border. There is no cattleman so rich as my father in Mexico."

She lifted her head with the little tilt of pride he knew well. Senorita Rita Aliaz, heiress of the Fortuna, could well afford to lift her head a trifle higher than other girls. But to Carruthers the motion brought misery. He knew the truth about the Fortuna—knew what every Texan as far as San Antonio would know within a week—that old Diabla Aliaz had squandered his wealth in gambling; that not a thing on the Fortuna was unmortgaged save his daughter, and even she, it was rumored, was pledged to Ramon Doranda in return for his promised assistance when the crash came.

Carruthers might have given the same assistance and claimed the same reward, but something within him revolted against making the hand of the girl he loved the stake in a transaction over old Aliaz's gambling debts. If he could win her, if he could hold her promise freely from her own lips, then he felt free to buy up the whole Fortuna when the crash came and lay it at her feet. But she must be free to say yes or no. And she would say neither. She would only laugh.

"Have you told Ramon you would marry him?" he asked, with sudden earnestness. The uncertainty was maddening to him.

"Why do you ask?" she answered teasingly.

"Rita," he pleaded, "be serious. If you do not—"

She raised her arm with a sudden, imperative gesture and pointed to the herd.

"Look!" she cried. "They are stampeding!"

Carruthers looked. The brown sea had suddenly stirred to life. Undulating, swaying, branching out loosely at the edges, it was lurching toward them. There seemed to be nothing rapid or swift about its coming. Carruthers thought, almost idly, of how it resembled the swing of a bunch of race horses rounding the end of the field, when the movement was so concerted, so deliberate, that it hardly seemed a movement. The herders were riding here and there in confusion. They seemed mere specks of helpless misdirection in the distance.

Rita's face had lost its color. She turned her horse about, the reins held short and tight in her clinched hand.

"We must race before them as they come," she said. "If the horses keep

their strength they will not trample us."

But Carruthers had slipped from the saddle.

"It is sure death to try to ride with them," he answered. "Dismount and do as I tell you."

The stern masterfulness of his tone startled her. He had never spoken like that to her; no one had.

"Hold the horses," he ordered. She obeyed, watching him in breathless suspense. The brown cloud on the prairie was becoming more and more distinct. There was a heavy, low rumble in the air like far-off thunder. Carruthers drew a cigarette case from his pocket, and after hunting carefully he produced one.

"That is the only one I have," he said. "Pray that it doesn't go out."

He struck it on the box. The faint flame waved in the southeasterly breeze, caught the end of the cigarette and lit it. Before the match went out Carruthers spelled it and set fire to the grass. It was dry and yellow from the sun and caught the blaze with a snap. The wind fanned it, and a wavering line of thin smoke slid like a snake along the roots for several feet. The horses reared and kicked at the first whiff, and Carruthers seized the bridles from the girl.

"Take the cigarette," he said, handing it to her. "Keep it alight and set fire to the grass as far as you can reach in a straight line facing the north. The wind is from the southeast and will blow the fire toward the herd. It may turn them."

Holding the plunging, trembling horses, he watched her. There was no fear, no sign of weakness. She was alert and sure in her touch as she knelt here and there in the grass and fired it. As the cigarette failed she tore a bunch of grass, tied it with another wisp and set it blazing like a torch. In another minute a wall of smoke and smoldering flame closed them in from the rushing herd line.

"Come back," called Carruthers. The herd were not a quarter of a mile from them. He could see the leaders, heads down, and behind them line after line of tossing horns.

"Will they reach us?" whispered Rita as she stood close beside him, her face lifted to his.

"God knows. I don't," said Carruthers desperately. "It is all we can do."

"Jack, listen to me." There was a new light in her dark eyes, a new softened tone to her voice. "Ramon has done this. The herd has never stampeded before. He has done it for revenge upon you and me. Last night I told him so. I know about him and the claim he holds over the Fortuna and my father, but I would rather lose it all than—"

"Then what?" Carruthers let the bridles trail on the ground and held her close to his arms. The tremble of hundreds of hoofs shook the ground, the thunder grew louder, now and then there came a low, threatening bellow from somewhere gored by its fellows in the crush.

"Then lose you," Rita whispered as she closed her eyes to meet what might come.

The herd was on them, but as the leaders caught the first sickening whiff of smoke they hesitated and wavered. Low leaping tongues of flame flashed up before them and rolls of smoke curled upward.

The leaders swerved westward. After them plunged the frightened herd, maddened and scared at the smell of the fire. The two horses, loosened, joined them in the frantic gallop, and in less than three minutes the danger had passed, and on the blackened bit of land stood Carruthers and Rita alone.

"The river will stop them," said Rita. "Ramon—I know he has done this to harm you. You must leave the ranch. No one can say what he may do next."

Carruthers bent to pick up something from the ground. It was the stub of a cigarette. He placed it tenderly and carefully in his case before he spoke.

"I know what Ramon will do next, sweetheart. He will cross the border into his own land tonight or else land in the hands of the sheriff. I mean to stay in Texas, and there is not room for both of us."

"On the Fortuna?"

"On our ranch," he said. "I bought the Fortuna yesterday to make sure of Ramon and of my senorita."

He didn't lie.

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"Jackson Brown," said the grandfather sternly, "you is shore keepin' sumthin' back! Member what de good book says, child?"

"Yas'ah," glily responded the third generation. "I knows dat de Bible says 'Yo' all musn't lie, but it don't say 'Yo' all got to tell de true all de time!'"

New York Times.

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Dated April 27, 1906.  
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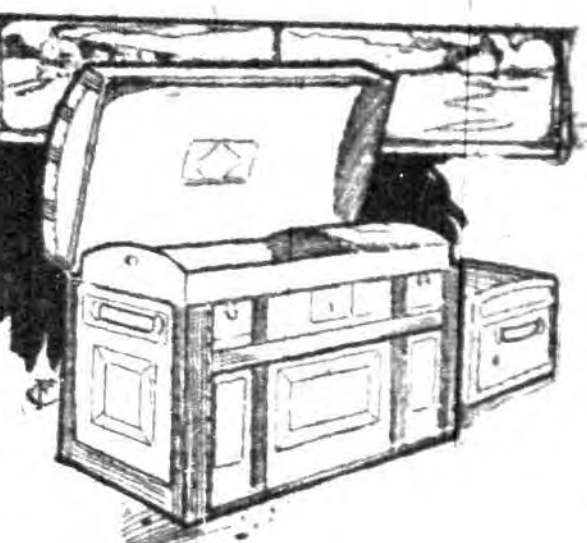
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